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Integration of merged colleges and decentralisation of decision-making in Flanders (Belgium)

Jef C. Verhoeven
Centre for Sociology of Education
KU Leuven

CIPES & HEDDA Seminar Governance structure in Higher
Education Institutions
Douro River Portugal
13-17 October 2001

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1. Problem and questions

Law of 13 July 1994 on the colleges of higher education

- a policy of decentralisation, deregulation, and more autonomy for the lower policy makers
- merging of 164 colleges to 29 (now 25)
- structure of decision making and participation
- position of staff
- quality assurance
- system of control

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- 1) To what extent do general managers, heads of departments, and staff (all members of decision making and participatory bodies) experience the integration of the different departments in the college?
- 2) What kind of decentralisation or centralisation of the administration of the college do these policy makers experience?
- 3) Is there a relation between the integration of the colleges and the decentralisation of the decision making procedure in the colleges?

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2. The legal decision making structure in colleges

- Difference between autonomous, and grant-aided (independent and provincial)
- Board of Directors
- Academic council
- Departmental council
- Negotiation committee of Department
- Negotiation committee of College

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3. Changing organisations in a changing society

- The process of merging and scaling-up of colleges in Flanders has to be situated in a process of change from an industrial society to a service society.
- knowledge and information society
- the importance of strong involvement of collaborators who take initiatives in the organisation in order to face the problems of a fast changing society→organic organisation that relies more on common values and goals than on a hierarchy

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- professional bureaucracy: domain of management is mainly bureaucratically organised, whereas the domain of teaching should have an organic structure
- The increase of autonomy and deregulation for colleges could mean that they have to develop more to an organic structure with less centralisation of the decision making
- Scaling-up implies more centralisation
- merged colleges have to look for a road between centralisation and decentralisation to attain their goals = centralised decentralisation
- To study centralisation in this paper we research the process of decision making in the colleges

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4. Methods of research

- Sample of 1, 282 members of the different councils in 16 colleges
- Mailed questionnaire; response rate: 63%
- integration of colleges = the extent that departments of the same college have frequent and regular contact, and strive collectively for some common targets (12 items)
- Centralisation in colleges = the measure that decisions in colleges are taken on the level of the administration of the college (the level of the general manager). If decisions are taken by heads of the departments and/or the departmental councils = decentralisation.

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Decision-making processes analyzed on three levels:

- 1) the level of proposing the college policy;
- 2) the level of influencing the decision-making processes in colleges;
- 3) the level of following-up the decisions taken concerning the college policy

Three domains of decision-making:

- 1) the domain of finance and equipment;
- 2) the domain of education policy;
- 3) the domain of human resource management.

For each domain different fields of decision-making were provided.

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5. Analysis

5.1. Integration

- Mean score of integration was 34.16 (standard deviation = 9.24) on a scale of 60.
- A little less than 35% of the interviewees: score of 30 or less, 39% had a score of 31-40, and the rest had a score higher than 40 (but not higher than 54).
- leaders of organisations have a more positive opinion about co-operation in organisations than the other members

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Table 1.1. Integration of the colleges according to the position

| Integration | General manager | | Head of department | | Staff | | |
|-------------|-----------------|------|--------------------|------|-------|------|-------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | Total |
| Low | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4.9 | 137 | 39.3 | 139 |
| Middle | 6 | 54.5 | 16 | 39.0 | 163 | 46.7 | 185 |
| High | 5 | 45.5 | 23 | 56.1 | 49 | 14.0 | 77 |
| Total | 11 | 100 | 41 | 100 | 349 | 100 | 421 |

- Members of provincial ($\bar{x} = 37.43$) and independent ($\bar{x} = 34.63$) colleges consider colleges more integrated than members of state colleges ($\bar{x} = 32.19$)

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5.2. Centralisation

Finance and equipment:

- Decision making concerning finance and equipment seems to be rather centralised
- State and independent colleges: centralised and decentralised
- Provincial colleges: centralised

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- Table 2.1. Decision-making about finances and equipment by general manager, head of Department, and departmental council (means and std) (max. score = 4)

| Level of decision making | Average value (8) | Significant differences | Standard deviation |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| General manager proposes | 1.86 | A | 1.58 |
| Head proposes | 1.56 | B | 1.37 |
| Council proposes | 0.59 | C | 0.99 |
| General manager influences | 2.32 | A' | 1.55 |
| Head influences | 1.85 | B' | 1.52 |
| Council influences | 0.45 | C' | 0.83 |
| Follow-up by general manager | 2.18 | A'' | 1,62 |
| Follow-up by head | 1.78 | B'' | 1.53 |
| Follow-up by council | 0.62 | C'' | 1.06 |

Table 2.2. Decision-making about education policy by general manager, head of department, and departmental council (means and std) (max. score = 7)

| Levels of decision making | Average value (8) | Significant differences (1) | Standard deviation |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| General manager proposes | 2.06 | A | 2.04 |
| Head proposes | 4.41 | B | 2.22 |
| Council proposes | 3.25 | C | 2.25 |
| General manager influences | 2.50 | A' | 2.22 |
| Head influences | 4.61 | B' | 2.47 |
| Council influences | 3.11 | C' | 2.36 |
| Follow-up by general manager | 2.53 | A'' | 2.32 |
| Follow-up by head | 4.74 | B'' | 2.43 |
| Follow-up by council | 2.70 | A'' | 2.46 |

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Education policy

- State and independent colleges: decentralised
- Provincial: both centralised and decentralised

Human resource management

- state colleges: decentralised
- independent: decentralised (head)
- Provincial: middle position

- Table 2.3. Decision-making about human resources by general manager, head of department, and departmental council (means and std) (max. score = 6)

| Levels of decision making | Average value (8) | Significant differences (1) | Standard deviation |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| General manager proposes | 2,74 | A | 2,38 |
| Head proposes | 3,85 | B | 2,21 |
| Council proposes | 1,38 | C | 2,05 |
| General manager influences | 2,73 | A' | 2,42 |
| Head influences | 4,30 | B' | 2,25 |
| Council influences | 1,22 | C' | 2,00 |
| Follow-up by general manager | 2,62 | A'' | 2,50 |
| Follow-up by head | 4,21 | B'' | 2,35 |
| Follow-up by council | 1,21 | C'' | 2,05 |

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5.3. Integration and decentralisation

- we hypothesised that a higher level of decentralisation would go together with a higher level of integration

5.3.1. Decentralisation of finance policy and integration

- positive significant relationship between integration and the act of making proposals in financial matters by the head ($r=.146$) and the general manager ($r=.133$), and the follow-up of the decisions by the head ($r=.16$) and the general manager ($r=.133$).
- independent colleges: a positive relation between integration and centralisation linked to general manager, not to head

Table 5. Correlations (Spearman) between different levels and domains of centralisation and integration

| | Finance | Education | Human resources |
|------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------------|
| General manager proposes | .133** | .105 | .194** |
| Dep. head proposes | .146* | .094 | -.009 |
| Dep. council proposes | -.051 | .117* | -.093 |
| General manager influences | .077 | .190** | .232*** |
| Dep. head influences | .106 | .063 | .027 |
| Dep. council influences | .041 | .165** | .088 |
| Follow-up by general manager | .133* | .193* | .230*** |
| Follow-up by dep. head | .160** | .110 | -.008 |
| Follow-up by dep. council | -.003 | .017 | -.089 |

*p<.05

**p<.01

***p<.001

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State colleges: a positive relation between integration and centralisation linked to head, not to general manager
Provincial colleges: no relation

5.3.2. Decentralisation of educational policy and integration

- Hypothesis: when respondents see more action in educational matters coming from the heads and the departmental councils they also experience a higher degree of integration
- Negative

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- departmental councils play a role in independent colleges
- centralisation (general manager) supports integration

5.3.3. Decentralisation and human resource policy

- decentralisation of the human resource policy is not related to the integration of the colleges

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6. Discussion and conclusion

- Most of the colleges were totally new constructions.
- They had not to start from scratch
- The new decision making structure of both funded and grant-aided colleges has in principle the possibility in itself to develop an organic organisation.
- data shows that the interest among the involved decision makers in the different domains of college policy differs.

Finance and equipment policy is seen to be mainly the domain of the top of the college and partly of the heads of the departments. The departmental councils play only a minor role.

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- Decentralisation of **education policy** is the main trend in state and independent colleges; in provincial colleges: a mixed form of centralisation and decentralisation
- **Human resource policy** is also perceived as decentralised in state and independent colleges; in provincial colleges it has a mixed form.
- Our hypothesis was that taking into account the development of organisations in our society into learning or network organisations, which means a more organic pattern of organisation, that integration of the colleges could be related to decentralisation of the decision making procedure: data refuses

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- Only 4 out of 18 relations support the hypothesis that integration of the colleges is linked with decentralisation.
- How can this relationship be explained? We conjecture that we have to place these statements within the context of innovation process.
- Given the formal decision making structure of the colleges we expect that once the colleges are more integrated, a development to more decentralisation might emerge